

Equal access to quality care: Lessons from France on providing high quality and affordable early childhood education and care

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Along with the Nordic countries, France leads the European Union in public childcare provision and benefits aimed at reducing child care costs for families. It has also widely been recognised that the French childcare system has many strengths (OECD, 2012). In recent years, however, in the context of economic uncertainties, policy makers have been confronted with new tensions and dilemmas. While France has continued over the last decade to progressively consolidate and enhance its promotion of policies to support the work/family life balance, the introduction of new laws in the domain of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has mirrored the growing hold of employment policies over childcare policies.

What has been at stake when it comes to accessible, affordable and good quality ECEC? To which extent the system is meeting the challenge of providing equal access for all children aged under-six? What were the rationales underpinning changes and what were the key drivers of change? Against the background of budgetary constraints, what are currently the main priorities? What is the impact of the rising demand of formal childcare provisions on quality framework and tools? These are the questions addressed in this paper.

The first part of the chapter will be devoted to the ECEC system. I will in particular investigate whether socio-economically disadvantaged children are accessing high quality ECEC to the same extent as their more advantaged peers. Funding and cost of care to families will follow. Then I will focus on the quality issue and the recent decisions made in this domain. To conclude I will highlight some of the challenges policy makers currently face and the tensions they have to deal with.

A note on terminology: for the rest of the chapter I will be using early childhood education and care as well as other terms, such as *crèches*, childminders, *écoles maternelles* (nursery schools), *Multi-accueil*, (multi-functional childcare centres),

which more aptly describe the services available in France, as the chapter will make clear.

1. An extensive and segmented system of public provision: day care and *écoles maternelles*

France has a well-established and long-standing early childhood system dating back to the end of the 19th century. The system has two tiers falling under separate ministerial auspices: formal childcare provisions --publicly-subsidised centre-based and home-based arrangements – on one hand and *écoles maternelles* on the other hand. This dual system is a legacy of the past.

As Table 1 illustrates, the services available depend on the age of the child. While almost all children aged three to six are enrolled in *écoles maternelles*, which are free and fully integrated in the school system, the system of services for children under three is more varied and coverage rate is lower. For this reason, in this section I will put emphasis on children below three years.

Table 1: Main services and provisions (ECEC) available by child age

Age of the child	Maternity and Paternity leave*	Parental leave (with or without a benefit)*	IAJE (<i>crèches</i> and <i>multi-accueil</i>)	Licensed Childminders	Nanny/day-care employee	Nursery schools (<i>écoles maternelles</i>)
Under age 1	<i>Length of maternity leave : 16 weeks</i> Mothers having a third or higher order child: 24 weeks of leave <i>Paternity leave: 2 weeks</i>	Until the child reaches three years. Under certain conditions parents can be provided with a flat-rate benefit (€ 566 per month in 2012) paid by the CAF	The child can attend up to a maximum of 10 hours per day Licensing and supervision by the local PMI services (at the department level) Funded by local authorities and CAFs; Fees for parents are income-related	Main formal childcare arrangement outside the parents Childcare allowance paid by the CAF Licensing and supervision by the local PMI services (at the department level)	Very few parents can afford to hire someone at home Parents are provided with a childcare allowance and tax breaks The employee is not supervised by PMI services	-
Aged 1	-	Similar to children less than 1 year	Similar to children less than 1 year	Similar to children less than 1 year	Similar to children less than 1 year	-
Aged 2	-	Similar to children less than 1 year	Similar to children less than 1 year	Similar to children less than 1 year Children who attend nursery school only half time, can be looked after by a	Similar to children less than 1 year Children who attend nursery school only half time, can be looked after by a nanny the	<i>Toute petite section</i> (very little section) or children may be integrated with the three-to-five year olds

				childminder the rest of the day	rest of the day	
Aged 3-6	-	-	-	Children who attend nursery school only half time, can be looked after by a childminder the rest of the day	Children who attend nursery school only half time, can be looked after by a nanny the rest of the day	Almost all children aged three to six attend it full time or part-time

* For more details, see Fagnani, J., A. Math, (2011) and Boyer, D. (2012)

1.1 Setting the scene for the institutions in charge of formal childcare provisions

In relation to children under three responsibility for services is shared by several institutional actors: the national family allowance fund (*Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales* – CNAF), the national ministries in charge of social policies and health, local authorities and social partners, like the national union of family associations (*Union Nationale des Associations Familiales* -- UNAF). Enterprises, non-profit/voluntary organisations, and the market still play a minor role in comparison to the state. Currently however, for-profit providers are increasingly being considered as real partners in policy development and service delivery in France. These services are, nevertheless, poorly coordinated. The most recent report of the national audit office (*Cour des Comptes*) released in July 2008 therefore recommended to “reinforce the coherence of their respective intervention” (Cour des comptes, 2008).

The CNAF and its large network of decentralised CAFs (123 local family allowance funds) play a key and pivotal role in the funding and provision of childcare services. In theory social partners such as family organizations, employers’ representatives and workers’ trade-unions, which are represented on the Executive Board of the CNAF, periodically determine the orientations for intervention in family and childcare policies. In practice, decisions are made by the Government, whether approved or not by the Executive Board. It is solely at the local level that the Executive Boards of the CAFs have any real decision-making power, and in particular, a margin for manoeuvre in the funding and development of childcare services.

Since 2002, “early childhood commissions” are working at the *département* level: they are in charge of bringing together all the relevant actors (local authorities,

representatives of the ministry of education, the CAF, the trade unions and family associations) to enhance coherence, co-ordinate services, provide information to families (through for instance the internet site *Monenfant.fr*), increase equality of access to services and support innovation in the field.

1.2. A complex combination of subsidized centre-based and home-based arrangements and a system based on the principle of universality

The majority of children under three are, however, mainly cared for by one of the parents (mostly the mother, working or not) during the week.

Table 2: Childcare arrangements for under-threes during the week (in %)

	All children (in %)		Both parents work full-time (in %)
	Main childcare arrangement	Second childcare arrangement	Main childcare arrangement
Creches	10	8	18
Registered chilminders	18	8	37
Nanny/ day-care employee (publicly subsidized)	2	-	4
Total formal arrangements	30	16	59
Looked after by relatives	4	11	9
Looked after by parents	63	33	27
Other arrangement [†]	3	7	5
<i>No second arrangement</i>		33	
TOTAL	100%		100%

Source: Boyer et al (2012: 22-23). Data refers to 2007.

Main childcare arrangement refers to the arrangement in which the child spends most of the hours between 9am and 7pm from Monday to Friday. Second childcare arrangement is ranked second in terms of hours spent, as above. † “Other” includes friends, neighbours, baby-sitters or other person not related to the family, *jardin d’enfants*, nursery school or setting for children with special needs.

The French childcare system is based on the principle of universality and the rationale underlying this system is to provide equal access to all public facilities whatever the income or the social background of the family; this means that *crèches* are not targeted at low-income families. However, lone mothers in employment or registered as unemployed are frequently given priority, in particular in disadvantaged areas. Indeed, there is a consensus among policy-makers and public opinion that the best way to lift families and their children out of poverty is to help the mother to sustain employment.

Although formal childcare provisions (*crèches* and childminders) are highly subsidised and fees are income-related, for low-income families these services remain expensive. Indeed, almost all children from the lowest income families are cared for mainly by their parents (Table 3). For working parents this means coordinating so that working schedules do not overlap. Among low income families, the take-up rate of the parental leave benefit is much higher than among better-off families (Boyer, 2012). This flat-rate benefit (€ 566 per month if the parent stops working) can be provided until the child reaches the age of three. In 2009, 61 per cent of low qualified mothers compared to 22 per cent of highly qualified mothers claimed this benefit (Boyer, 2012).

Besides differences in ECEC usage across income levels, it is worth noting that there are large geographical disparities in the supply of places in centre-based provisions (Borderies, 2012). In deprived areas, often located in the outer suburbs, if parents cannot get a place in those centres mothers are therefore prone to stop seeking work or to be in employment.

1.3 Centre-based provision: crèches and multi-accueil

Nearly 15% of all children under three attend centre-based services, which take mainly the form of *crèches collectives*, open up to 11 hours a day all year round. Over the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of multi-centres (*Multi-accueil*), now termed *Etablissements d'accueil du jeune enfant – EAJE*. Nearly three quarters of *crèches* are based in such centres (CNAF, 2012). The rationale is to group together in one place different childcare services, offering multiple and flexible

arrangements: *crèches*, *halte-garderies* (half-time and occasional day care), *jardins d'enfants*, *crèches parentales* (where parents can also be involved in the management and daily work), emergency care for children at risk and rooms for child minders. The objective was to meet parents' needs by providing them with opportunities to modify their childcare arrangements in relation to job demands: from part-time to full-time for instance, on a regular basis or from time to time, etc.. The use of some slots in '*Multi-accueil*' are therefore not defined in advance.

Since 2003, the provision of childcare services is also open to for-profit providers with the explicit objective of increasing the availability of childcare places. They have access to public subsidies (from the local CAF) if they meet the specific quality requirements (see below) and if they operate income-related fees.

Moreover, while the vast majority of collective childcare centres are located in the neighbourhoods where families live, a few employers have created child care centres called *crèches d'entreprise* (workplace *crèches*, mostly run by for-profit providers) for their staff. They also have access to public subsidies if they meet specific quality requirements (see below). There are currently about 500 *crèches d'entreprise* (representing around 2.7% of the total of places in collective childcare centres). Cooperating with local authorities and CAFs, companies can also contribute to the setting-up and running costs of public centre-based services (including around-the-clock home-based childcare) and in exchange some places are reserved for their employees' children.

In disadvantaged areas¹, over the last decade, the government and the CNAF made important efforts to increase access to collective childcare settings. One of the main objectives of the national programme '*Plan Crèches Espoir Banlieues*' (literally: "project childcare hope in disadvantaged areas") is to encourage the creation of 'innovative' and 'flexible' childcare places suitable for parents with non-standard working schedules. The programme, however, does not mean that children from the most deprived families have systematically priority access to day care centres for

¹ Located in the 215 neighbourhoods designated as "Sensitive Urban Areas" (*Zones Urbaines Sensibles*) or in communes with an 'Urban social cohesion contracts' (*contrats urbains de cohésion sociale*, CUCS).

under-threes because the system remains based on the principle of universality and one of the criteria of the choices (among candidates on the waiting list) made by the local council is to mix children from diverse social backgrounds.

Importantly, *crèches* are highly valued by families, as a result of the staff's qualification requirements in place (see below) and of the prevalent idea that *crèches* provide an 'ideal' preparation for the transition to nursery school and consequently to primary education. Therefore the demand emanating from middle-class families is high. The early socialization (a longstanding tradition in France dating back to the end of the nineteenth century) this provides is held in high esteem, and the probability that a child will attend a *crèche* increases significantly when his or her mother has reached a high level of educational attainment. 21 per cent of those children whose parents are in senior or middle management or occupying supervisory roles are enrolled in a *crèche* as their main childcare during the week, compared with only 5 per cent of children from working-class families (Ananian, Robert-Bobée, 2009). Table 3 also shows that children living in the wealthiest families are overrepresented in childcare centres.

1.4. Registered childminders: a major contribution to the supply of childcare services

Since the nineties, the primary method for bridging the gap between supply and demand for childcare has been to increase government support for licensed child minders who look after children in their private home.² By 2010, the number of childminders looking after children reached 306 256 (including 1 434 men). They are required to register with local authorities, a procedure that is mandatory if parents who rely on them wish to be eligible for the related childcare allowance paid by the local CAF and the tax deduction.

When both parents work full-time, childminders are the main and primary form of care arrangement for under-threes: 37% are looked after by a childminder. The same is true for the whole population of children looked after in any formal care arrangement (Table 2).

² Referred to as *assistantes maternelles* (literally: maternal assistants).

Some registered childminders are directly employed by municipalities or by NGOs (termed *crèches familiales*). In rural areas, some local authorities have developed *micro crèches*, where childminders look after children in a collective place, mixing individual childcare by childminders and collective care.

In socio-economically deprived areas, low qualified women are being encouraged to become childminders, both to increase the supply of places in formal childcare and to support women's employment. A counsellor of the local employment agency advises them and they may be provided with a financial support from the CAF to help them adapt their home to regulatory requirements.

Working parents can also hire a baby-sitter or a nanny to look after their children either on a full-time basis or to provide after-school care and to cover Wednesdays. Provided that he/she is declared, a childcare allowance covers part of the social security contributions that must be paid by these families. In addition, they may deduct 50%, up to €6,000 per year, of the real costs from their income tax. However, only a few parents can afford this care arrangement (Table 3).

1.5 Nursery schools: écoles maternelles

Écoles maternelles are free for parents and are fully integrated into the school system under the national Ministry of Education, with the same guiding principles, opening hours, and administration as elementary schools. According to the French Education code 'every child upon reaching the age of three has the right (but it is not compulsory) to attend a nursery school and almost all children aged three to six attend it full time or part-time. Children are usually grouped into three classes, according to age. Mixed-age grouping is relatively uncommon.

Nursery schools are generally open from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm and have canteen facilities (under the supervision of a dietician) where fees are income-related. They are routinely closed on Wednesdays, but are supplemented by half-day Saturday sessions.

Over the last decade, policies targeted to children from disadvantaged backgrounds have channelled additional resources towards schools located in more deprived

areas. An area is designated as a *Zone d'éducation prioritaire* (ZEP), 'priority education areas', when it includes a high proportion of those children, defined according to a variety of criteria outlined by the national Ministry of Education. The government passed a law in 2005 to encourage and extend in these areas access of under-threes to *école maternelle* by providing them with priority access. In schools with many two-year-olds, there may be a *toute petite section* (very little section) or children may be integrated with the three-to-five year olds. Child/staff ratio is most often falling to 20 children plus an assistant and is capped at 25.

The shortfall of places in *crèches*, and the fact that this service is free, has given parents living in ZEPs a strong incentive to ask for a place in a nursery school. However, the share of children aged between two and three in *écoles maternelles* has fallen off sharply from 37% in 2000 to 11.6% in 2011. This is mainly due to the dramatic increase in the number of children aged between three and six (following a growth in fertility rate since 1999) who are given priority over the two year olds and to funding restrictions at the national ministry of Education (resulting in the reduction in the number of teachers and assistants). On the other hand the enrolment of two-year-olds remains a controversial issue: some children's experts underline that *école maternelle* is not appropriate to the needs of under-threes³ while some research shows the benefits of early schooling for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is important to note, however, that most of the under-threes attend school only in the morning (Vanovermeir, 2012).

2. Funding structures: the state, the CAFs, and local authorities

Funding structures are very complex and vary according to the type of care arrangement. Many stakeholders are involved in funding: the state (through the ministry of education and tax breaks related to childcare allowances), the CAFs, the local authorities and the families. It is worth noticing that despite a general tightening of purse strings in public expenditures, childcare policies have continued to see

³ See 'L'école maternelle'. Report of General Inspections, ministry of National Education, October 2011.

increases in funding and remain a growth area in the French welfare state⁴.

Therefore the system of public *crèches*, and more generally EAJE, has suffered no funding cutbacks.

CNAF is the leading contributor (73 per cent) to childcare for under 3s. CNAF allocates funds to each decentralised CAF to help local authorities create and run child care centres. Both public *crèches* and the few for-profit ones receive funding from CAF on a per child basis if they use the national sliding fee scale based on family income. Because individual settings cannot charge top-up fees, there is little incentive for them to select well-off families as they receive the same amount of money per child by the local CAF. The aim of this flat funding is precisely to ensure social mix in collective centres. By contrast, on the whole, costs to the CNAF vary greatly according to the level of income of families accessing *crèches*, with low income families receiving higher subsidies (Boyer, 2012).

Employers are involved in an indirect way in funding childcare because CNAF is mainly funded out of social security contributions paid by employers (around 65%). The state, through income tax and other taxes, is the other contributor.

Local authorities (*départements* and municipalities, also named *communes*) also make a significant financial commitment (Boyer, 2012). They have however substantial autonomy in offering *crèches* and EAJE in general: they are not required to create childcare facilities and sometimes prefer to encourage and help women to become childminders (through the funding of training programmes) because it is much less expensive for them than to develop day care centres. This partly explains why there is a substantial variation in *crèches* enrolment rates across the country. Local authorities also fund part of the running costs of nursery schools but teachers' wages are paid by the national ministry of Education.

In regard to collective childcare settings, the rules that govern the levels of public funding (by the State and the CNAF), and the levels of (income-related) fees to be

⁴ As far as collective childcare facilities are concerned, CNAF expenditures increased by 59.4 per cent over the period 2006-2011. CNAF (2012), *Prestations familiales 2011*, Statistiques nationales, Paris.

paid by the parents are set up nationally following guidelines fixed through agreements signed every four years between the government and the CNAF. The cost of childcare to parents depend on the type of care arrangement chosen, the number and ages of children, and the income level. Indeed for all forms of subsidized childcare provision (outside *écoles maternelles* which are free) parents pay on a sliding scale according to their income.

Childminding is subsidised both by the state and by the CAFs. The state allows tax deductions from income tax, up to a limit of €1,150 per year, and offers tax credits for families who are not liable to income tax. The CAFs, on the other hand, subsidise childminding through an allowance (*'Complément de libre choix du mode de garde'*- CLMG; literally: supplement for the freedom of choice of the child care arrangement)⁵. The CLMG covers the social security contributions to be paid by the employer of the registered childminder, and also provides the family with an additional and income-related financial contribution. The amount of this allowance also varies according to the age of the child (less than 3, and 3 to 6) and the number of children living in the family.

In order to be eligible to receive the allowance, parents must pay the childminder at least the statutory minimum income⁶ defined by the CNAF to be eligible for the CLMG: €46.10 per child and per day corresponding to 10 hours of care for the child⁷ (the net median wage per hour and per child was €2.96 by 2010 and the net average wage per hour and per child €3.03) (Fagnani, Math, 2012).

In 2004 a significant increase in the allowance that low-income families receive made childminding more accessible than it was. However, for most of them, it remains however too expensive and in 2007 only 4% of the families with income below 1,100 euros per month could afford a childminder to care for their child aged below three

⁵ To be eligible both parents have to be employed or registered as unemployed or attending a training course.

⁶ Beyond this statutory wage, parents are free to pay more but the related social contributions will not be reimbursed by the CAF.

⁷ There are also strong geographical disparities: childminders living in the metropolitan Paris area – in particular those located in Paris downtown - are those who are the best paid (1440 € per month on average) as a result of the mismatch between supply and demand (Fagnani, Math, 2012).

compared to 22% of the families whose income was between 1,100 and 1,700 euros and 37% of the families earning more than 2,300 euros (Borderies, 2012) (see also Table 3).

As far as crèches are concerned, parents pay on a sliding scale according to their income. The cost of a place in a crèche also depends on the number of hours of attendance. For instance, in a family with a single child cared for 9 hours a day and 18 days per month, net out-of-pocket expenses amounts to an average of €400 per month to parents with an income-level of €5,471 and more while for an income-level of €2,163 this amount represents €100 per month (Boyer, 2012).

For low-income families, despite the related childcare allowance (CLMG), the cost of a childminder is twice the cost of a place in a crèche. The shortage of places in crèches is therefore detrimental to them, in particular to lone parent households, and presents a barrier to full-time work. Consequently when they are in employment they most often rely on relatives or to undeclared childminders.

3. Quality of provision and the current regulatory framework

3.1. PMI services: a crucial role in ensuring quality

The national public system of preventive health care and health promotion for all mothers and children from birth through age six (*Protection Maternelle et Infantile* – PMI) plays a crucial role and are responsible for upholding the quality of public childcare provision (childcare centres as well as licensed childminders). Created in 1945 and subsequently developed (Fagnani, 2006) local PMI services fall under the remit of the *départements* (local authorities) and are supervised by the national ministry of social affairs (the department of social security).

Local PMI are in charge of licensing and monitoring all care services which fall outside the remit of the public school system and intervene regularly across many areas. Primarily, they ensure that providers (including child care centres run by private providers but publicly subsidised) abide with regulation concerning health and safety (including preventive health exams and vaccinations), nutrition and staffing

standards. Doctors or *puéricultrices* employed by the PMI services regularly inspect services..

Health services are also integrated in *écoles maternelles*: they have a doctor and psychologist on their staff several hours per week or available for consultation as needed to provide evaluations and referrals. Preventive health exams are mandated for all four year-olds. Trained medical staff from the local PMI services also play a role in helping integrate children with special needs, whether in schools or childcare settings.

3.2. Policy priorities, goals and requirements affecting childcare provision

There is a different understanding of quality in nursery schools and in services for under-threes. This reflects the dual nature of the system of services. In relation to all publicly subsidised childcare services (except ‘nannies’ or home helpers) the policy priorities and goals can be summarised as follows:

- Ensuring children with safety, health, and a sense of well-being by focusing on education, socialisation, and cognitive development
- Giving parents a ‘freedom of choice’ over childcare arrangements
- Enabling parents (in particular mothers) to participate in the workforce
- Enhancing equal opportunities for children
- Complying with the principle of social justice (income-related fees in childcare settings)
- Encouraging social mix that underpins social cohesion.

It is assumed that child care centres can partly offset the negative outcomes for children living in families coping with hard living conditions (in particular overcrowded housing). But against the background of high unemployment rate, there is also an underlying rationale: creating a tool to fight unemployment by encouraging parents to hire someone to look after their children (licensed childminders and nannies).

Within this overall approach, different services have their specific quality regulatory framework, which is legally enforceable.

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In crèches, staffing standards are laid down nationally: 1 adult to 5 children who are not yet walking; and 1 to 8 for other children. To ensure psychology wellbeing, each child is under the specific supervision of a “*personne de référence*” (contact person).

Although there is no national curriculum for collective childcare settings, since 2000 *crèches* and *Multi-accueil* have been required to elaborate an ‘Education and social project’ (*Projet d’établissement*) that includes a *Projet éducatif* (Education programme) and a *Projet social* (Social project). The main goals embedded in the quality tools are: enhancement of cognitive and physical abilities, development of pedagogical activities, respect for biological rhythms, ensuring children with safety, health and child well-being, promoting and favouring social integration (see above). Parents are also encouraged to participate in the everyday life of the setting. Emphasis is also put on the exchanges with stakeholders involved in childcare policies, as well as on coordination with different agencies.

Other objectives include enhancing equal opportunities for children, thereby contributing to prevent social exclusion and to foster gender equality by supporting mothers’ participation in the labour market.

Childminders are closely supervised by PMI services, though with a frequency depending on the local authorities. Before being licensed, they are interviewed by a social worker, a paediatric nurse, and a psychologist. The housing conditions and environment for receiving children should be approved, especially in terms of space, hygiene, and safety. As of March 2012 PMI services have been required to use common standards for criteria related to the registration of childminders. And since 2005 registration procedures have to take into account the childminder’s educational skills. The license is valid for five years and can be renewed for consecutive periods. It specifies the number (no more than 4 simultaneously) and the age of children that can be cared for by the childminder, either fulltime or part-time.

Given that childminding is the most common childcare arrangement for children under three, in recent years policy-makers have been addressing in recent years the issue of their qualification. Indeed, though their average educational achievement had improved since the 1970s, in 2005, 49 % had no qualification whatsoever and

35 % had very low qualifications. Therefore, efforts to reduce the cost for parents of this type of care have been coupled with measures attempting to professionalise childminding. Since 2004 childminders have been required to receive 60 hours of additional training (in total 60 before and 60 in the two years following their registration). The training programme is paid and supervised by local authorities.

Despite these significant improvements, childhood experts and childminders' trade union, however, still point out the persistent shortcomings and the heterogeneity of the training programmes across the country and call for a further development of qualifications available to childminders (Fagnani, Math, 2012). However, parents cannot always afford to rely on a qualified childminder despite generous childcare allowances: such a person can be more demanding in this regard than a less trained counterpart.

In order to enhance early socialisation of children, childminders are encouraged to participate in childminders centres (*Relais assistants maternels - RAM*) where they can exchange on their own experience with other childminders and also receive advice from a qualified child nurse, while children can participate in collective activities. RAMs are highly valued by childminders (Fagnani, Math, 2012) but despite their rapid increase over the last years (the numbers currently reach 500), there is still a lack of these facilities.

In 2005 childminders' employment regulation were revised. The aim was both to enhance the quality of care by improving working conditions and to make this profession more attractive through stricter regulation. Such regulation made childminders' employment contract more in line with that of other employees. The objective of the reform was to make work regulations closer to the common work rules, especially with regard to the labour contract, to earnings and working time regulations. The '*professionalization*' programme renewed childminders' collective agreement, thus settling labour relations between employers (parents, municipalities, NGOs) and the childminders. The national employment contract is binding, defines minimum payments (see above) and limits the legal working time. Childminders' salary should be paid monthly in order to provide childminders with regular earnings

all over the year as well as entitlement for an annual paid leave. Finally, childminders became entitled to tax breaks on part of their earnings.

3.3. Staff qualifications and training programmes

Compared with childminders, staff in *crèches* (including in private *crèches* and in *crèches d'entreprise* subsidized by the CAFs) and *Multi-accueil* are well-trained, closely supervised and relatively well-remunerated (compared to the childminders). There are three categories of staff of workers. First, the *puéricultrice* (pediatric nurse) with four year post-secondary education. The *puéricultrice* usually works as the director of a *crèche* and Multi-accueil. But the director may also be doctor or midwife. All of them have to complete a year of specialization in children's development, health and well-being. At the end of the training programme, a practical experience takes place: the student is required to work in a maternity ward, neonatal unit, paediatrics as well in a sector of PMI services and in a *crèche*. The training programme is updated each year to take into account new health concerns.

The second category of staff is the *éducatrice de jeunes enfants* (early childhood educator), who is required to have a high school diploma and to undergo over a period of 27 months of vocational training programme comprising both theoretical training and practical field experience. *Auxiliaires de puéricultrice* – the third category of staff – can also attend this programme if they have three years of professional experience. If the centre has more than 40 places, there must be at least one *éducatrice de jeunes enfants*. They can develop educational projects and foster partnerships with families, schools, and other social and cultural settings.

At least half of the staff in centres must be *auxiliaires de puéricultrice* (assistant pediatric nurse). The *auxiliaire* is required to attend an '*école d'auxiliaires de puéricultrices*' where they are provided with a vocational qualification programme over a period of 12 months (1 575 hours comprising theoretical and practical fieldwork). Training is open to candidates who have passed the entry exams and have either a professional certificate or have completed four years of secondary education. The training includes pedagogy and human development; education and care; child development and educational practice; group management; law;

economics and social studies; and professional studies and methods. Training centres are mainly run privately, but accredited by the national Ministry of Health.

In *écoles maternelles*, on the other hand, all teachers (*professeur des écoles*) are public servants and must have passed before teaching a national exam which is open to those who have a three-year college degree. The exam includes written papers in French, math, science and art, a practical exam in sport, and an oral exam on workplace experiences. Those who pass the exam enrol in one of the public academic institutes for a year of professional training (about 450 hours).

It generally includes studies in education; philosophy; history of education; sociology; psychology; subject study and preparation for administrative tasks.

To help teachers with daily activities such as clean-up and toileting as well as in carrying out pedagogical activities, assistants named as ATSEM (*Agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles*) are employed by local authorities. Since 1992, ATSEM are required to hold a certificate in early childhood education (*CAP Petite enfance*), a professional qualification level accessible from the age of 16 without being required to have any diploma. These aides are appointed by the mayor and work under the supervision of the director of the school.

In *écoles maternelles* there are no national regulations for staff-child ratios. In 2010-2011, there was on average one teacher to every 25.7 children. The assistants, ATSEM, are not included in this calculation because not all local authorities fund enough assistants, especially with the other children, and moreover they are not present the whole day.

4. Tensions and inconsistencies

French childcare policy is currently facing new challenges linked to the numerous and dramatic changes which have occurred both on the labour market and in the family sphere. Policy makers have therefore to deal with tensions and difficult trade offs. In a context where their room of manoeuvre is limited, ensuring high quality provision seems at odds with affordability and availability of places for under-threes. How to reconcile children's interests with other interests, e.g. gender equality, employment and employers? Alongside some progress it is clear that reforms recently introduced

appear to be driven more by labour market pressure and mothers' rights to paid work than always couched in terms of the 'best interests' of the child.

Indeed, over the last decade the ministry in charge of family policies, local authorities and the CNAF, have refocused their energies and currently place more emphasis than before on the following issues: how to increase the number of available slots in the formal childcare sector (in response to the rise in the number of births and the need for many women to be in paid employment) and enable parents confronted with non standard or family-unfriendly flexible work hours to combine their job with family responsibilities (Fagnani, 2010) and at the same time how to promote female employment in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

4.1. Tensions between quality of care and a shortfall of places in crèches

Although measures were being taken over the last decade to compensate for a persistent shortfall in supply, policy makers have yet to satisfy the ceaseless demand for places in childcare facilities and the services of registered childminders⁸. This problem has been aggravated by the difficulties local authorities and CAFs have to cope with in recruiting qualified staff (due to funding restrictions, there is a dearth of places in training centres for people looking to qualify for jobs in the childcare sector) and thereby to reach the required standards imposed by PMI services (50 per cent at least of the staff in EAJE has to be made up of *puéricultrice*, *éducatrice de jeunes enfants*, *auxiliaires de puéricultrice*, nurses or psycho-motor therapists). This problem has also been reinforced by the fact that the number of children born in 2010 reached 833,000 representing a steady rise from the 757,000 reported in 1997. Moreover the enhancement of women's employment has continued to be an explicit objective of French family policies (Fagnani, Math, 2011). The increase in the number of places has therefore been given higher priority on the policy agenda. The results of a recent survey of local elected officials are indicative of this trend: over the last four years, 46% declared that they put at the forefront of their care policies the development of childcare places (CNAF, 2012).

⁸ The gap between supply and demand for formal childcare has been estimated at a minimum of 350,000 places by the *Haut Conseil de la Famille*, the High Family Council which advises the National government on family affairs.

http://www.hcf-famille.fr/IMG/pdf/Lettre_HCF_no2-3.pdf

4.2. Tensions between quality and affordability

The objective of the enhancement of women's employment – in particular in disadvantaged areas – does not always go hand in hand with an easy access to affordable childcare. And as far as registered childminders are concerned, the move towards their professionalization pushed up the price of this care arrangement. The increase in the amount of the CLMG, decided in 2004, did not fully offset this phenomenon. It is therefore detrimental to low income parents who are likely to be less demanding in terms of quality of care provided by childminders since demand far outstrips supply in childcare settings.

Concomitantly policy makers are once again confronted with another dilemma: taking into account the shortage of childminders in many urban areas, how to make more attractive this profession without increasing their earnings (Himmelweit, 2007)? But against the background of budgetary constraints, will the parents be willing to pay more a better trained childminder? A recent research based on a representative sample of parents relying on a childminder shows that only around a third would be willing to pay more (Fagnani, Math, 2012).

4.3. Tensions between quality and the objective of meeting the needs of parents confronted with atypical working schedules

Along with the organisational changes at the workplace, staff in the sector childcare have been placed under pressure to adapt their own working hours to the needs of the increasing number of parents confronted with long and/or nonstandard working hours. Moreover a growing number of employees have a low degree of command over the scheduling of their work hours, in particular in low paying occupations. .

Taking into account their family obligations, individuals employed in the childcare sector are all striving to protect their own interests and are reluctant to submit to ever more flexible working schedules. Registered child minders, if they can afford to⁹, will often refuse to look after a child outside of standard working hours. The result is that young children are often cared for by a rotating cast of characters and institutions

⁹ In cases where it is difficult for parents to make alternative arrangements or when the caregiver is held in high esteem by the family.

within the same day. This is particularly true when both parents have non-standard work schedules; or when the parent is living alone (Bressé et al., 2007).

4.4. Recent decisions made at the expense of quality in childcare provision

Against this background, the following decisions have been made over the last decade on how to relieve some of the tensions inherent in the current childcare policies.

New legislation was passed on June 2010 introducing significant reforms in the '*Code de la santé publique*' (Public health regulation). First, a decision was made to decrease from 50% to 40% the minimum share of staff required to qualify as skilled workers (*puéricultrice, éducateur de jeune enfant, auxiliaire puéricultrice*) in childcare centres. This decision was motivated by the fact that a shortage of skilled workers had been acting as a brake on the swifter development of such centres.

Second, citing the fact that many young children registered in childcare centres do not attend every day or on a full time basis , the government decided to raise the number of children these centres would be authorized to accept. From 2011, *crèches* with more than 40 slots are allowed to increase by 20% the number of children registered and attending the *crèche* (15% for *crèches* with less than 40 slots and 10% for those with less than 20 slots).

Third, since the law of 2009 was passed, instead of being limited to having only three children simultaneously under their care, registered childminders are now allowed up to four. The aim was to increase the number of places in childcare provision and to provide the childminders with the opportunity to earn more thereby making this job more attractive. However, in a survey of local officials (Pillayre, Robert-Bobée, 2010) based in 94 departments and responsible for the supervision of childminders, 69% declare that this measure will result in less time devoted by childminders to each child, less opportunities to play with them and less availability to enhance their cognitive development. Almost one out of five underline the risk involved as far as security is concerned and insufficient space in the home for each child to be able to rest.

None of these decisions have passed without controversy and some trade-unions and associations have denounced them as threats to the quality of childcare¹⁰. So far, the government has turned a deaf ear to these criticisms.

The ministry in charge of family affairs introduced a measure in 2004 to promote the creation of *crèches* in private companies (termed '*crèches d'entreprise*') by providing them with tax deductions along with partial funding from the CAFs. In the context of increasing commuting time, this type of solution can be detrimental to child wellbeing, as children would have to commute with their parents. Related to this, in an attempt to satisfy employers' demand for more atypical work hours the last decade has witnessed an increase in the number of childcare services and *crèches* operating 24 hours a day and 7 days a week in order to allow working parents to meet the demands placed upon them by employers. These company-run centres (partly funded by the CAFs, see above) are a response to the new realities of the workplace. The need for extended childcare opening hours set to match is a shared one. The example of Renault (a leader in the French automotive industry) is emblematic of the new reality: since 2010 its employees have enjoyed access to childcare from 5:30 am to 10:30 pm and this clearly illustrates that the children of its employees are spending significant amounts of time in outside care and thereby in commuting¹¹.

Within the same approach, while the government supports the development of childcare centres in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (see above), strong emphasis is put on the promotion of opening hours that are more in tune with 'the needs of working parents' and on the development of so-called 'flexible' and 'innovative' child care arrangements. Operating hours of the childcare centres have been extended to over 10 hours per day, exceeding the current regulations granting children the right to attend a *crèche* as well as an *école maternelle* up to a maximum of 10 hours per working day.

¹⁰ In April 2010 they drew up a petition against the new legislation under the banner of '*Pas de bébé à la consigne*' (Left luggage: no babies allowed) and organised several demonstrations.
<http://www.pasdebebesalaconsigne.com>

¹¹ Strazdins and al. (2006) have demonstrated that non-standard work schedules have detrimental effects on children's well-being and on the quality of interactions within the family.

In 2009, with the explicit objective of increasing the availability of childcare places, the government decided to create and support a new type of collective arrangement, called '*jardins d'éveil*', where 2 to 3 year-old children could be cared for. They are supposed to serve as bridges between the home and the nursery school. Vocal criticisms, however, were raised as the quality of this type of childcare would be patchier than in *crèches* where the statutory child-to-staff ratio is 8:1 compared to 12:1 in '*jardins d'éveil*' and the qualification requirements of the staff less stricter¹². These new centres were also widely viewed as an underhanded way to transfer more of the financial burden for care from the government to parents' shoulders by reducing the demand for places in nursery schools and siphoning it into the '*jardins d'éveil*'. These centres have met, however, with very little success.

Conclusion

Though the 'EU Framework of Law for Children's Rights'¹³ states that 'all EU policies must be designed and implemented in line with the child's best interests', new developments in France have given rise to increasing tensions and dilemmas despite attempts have been made to reconcile the quantitative with the qualitative in the formulation of consistent childcare policy. While the focus has continued to remain on supporting mothers' employment by subsidizing formal individual care arrangements as well as collective ones, reforms introduced since the mid-nineties illustrate clearly the ways in which employment policies have encroached on the ground previously occupied by French family policy.

Moreover, reforms introduced by the government have created employment both on the supply-side (increased labour market participation of women) and on the demand-side (increased number of jobs in childcare services), but there are still important gaps in quality as far as childminders are concerned, and heterogeneity in this field is still the rule.

¹² See

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCode.do?idArticle=LEGIARTI000022320496&idSectionTA=LEGISC TA000006196369&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006072665&dateTexte=20121127>

¹³ European Parliament Directorate-General for Internal Affairs (2012) *EU Framework of Law for Children's Rights*
<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2012/apr/ep-study-childrens-rights.pdf>

In all these domains, responsibilities (spread over different social partners) are all too often dissipated which leads to a lack of accountability for actions taken; and no one is held responsible for instance for the mismatch between supply and demand of childcare at the local level. Spatial disparities in supply of places in centre-based settings also remain wide and continue to hinder access of all families to high quality childcare.

Last but not least, the issue of the predominantly female workforce in the childcare sector has not yet been addressed though it would be a significant component of a holistic and comprehensive approach to promoting high quality childcare.

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Table 3– Children aged under 3: Breakdown according to the main childcare arrangement during the week and the family income level (in %)

Income per consumption unit	Parents	Relatives	Licensed childminder	Childcare centres (EAJE)	<i>Ecole maternelle</i>	Nanny/ day-care employee	Other	TOTAL
First quintile	91	1	2	4	1	0	1	100
Second quintile	84	2	5	5	2	0	2	100
Third quintile	64	6	18	9	2	0	1	100
Fourth quintile	44	7	29	16	2	1	1	100
Fifth quintile	31	5	37	16	3	7	1	100

Source: Borderies (2012).

Annex